

My quest for eternal youth

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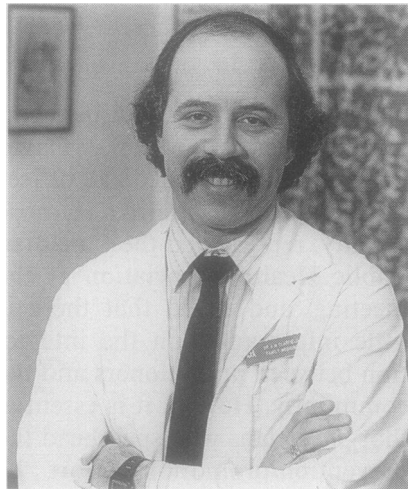
*"Every man desires to live long,
but no man would be old."
— Jonathan Swift*

Recently the premier issue of a new magazine rolled off the presses and on to my desk. It is called *Longevity* and in my dictionary that is defined as "long life; long duration of existence". Yet, the magazine is subtitled "A practical guide to the art and science of staying young".

Intrigued by this apparent contradiction in titular terminology, I spent \$9.97 on a subscription. What follows is a not-so-random romp through several issues, and a few observations. Turning to the contents page I learned that it is published by Bob Guccione of *Penthouse* fame. OK, so he's not known for producing scholarly publications, but at least three of the contributing editors are MDs and one of them, Dr. Robert Butler, used to head the National Institute of Aging in the US.

The first five pieces in last May's issue underline our society's clear ambivalence towards aging. Take "Help For Hair That's Old Before You Are", for instance. "Have you spotted a few too many greys? Here are the best color fixes for *your* hair — from Hennas to Lasers — to keep you looking as young as you feel."

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I perked up for another piece, "The Most Natural Act of All". I shouldn't have bothered. "Do you breathe right?" it asked. "If not you are cheating yourself of the longest and healthiest life possible."

Before you impatiently move on to another article in *CMAJ*, wondering why I am wasting your time with such trivia, keep in mind that *Longevity* also addresses some interesting issues relevant to the study of gerontology. For example, "Resurrection for Sale" tells the fascinating story of a California company specializing in cryonics, the "science" of very cold storage of still warm bodies. Sort of a die now, live later kind of thing.

Alcor is a nonprofit company that charges \$100 000 (US) to deep freeze the entire body, a mere \$35 000 for the head. People willing to throw away such large chunks of cash, albeit post mortem, do so hoping their bodies can be preserved until medical technology — shades of Dr. Frankenstein — can breathe life back into a corpse.

Turning a few pages I learned about the personal antiaging program of that heavyweight of science, author Erica Jong. Her thoughts on diet and nutrition? "I'm on a very low-fat, high-fiber diet. . . I also fast periodically for 5 to 10 days. I take very high doses of vitamins B, C, D and β -carotene. This has made a tremendous difference to my immune system."

Unfortunately, there is no editorial accompanying these dietary

musings to suggest that readers following her advice, especially the part about overdosing with fat-soluble vitamins, may in fact be placing their own health, not to mention their longevity, in jeopardy.

Moving on, I came to a feature on eight famous gerontologists and their thoughts on ways to stay young. They proffered the usual advice about not smoking, sticking to a low-cholesterol, high-fibre diet, exercising and reducing stress. Here's the piece of advice about relaxation techniques that I liked best: "To build in time to be alone — from 5:30 a.m. to 7:00 a.m."

Linus Pauling, the two-time Nobel Prize laureate who's still going strong at 89, ingests, along with his daily bread, from 18 to 50 g of vitamin C. I'd love to check his urine pH.

Dr. Roy Walford believes that a low-calorie diet adopted in middle age ensures a long and healthy life. "My calculations show if I started my diet at 60 and was destined to live to 90, I could stretch that to 120." His daily intake — 6280 to 7530 kJ (1500 to 1800 kcal). Although these hypocaloric ideas may strike the reader as revolutionary, they have been around for quite a while. In the 16th century an Italian nun told how her grandfather, Luigi Comaro, managed to live to a ripe old age. "He was extraordinarily sober . . . and dieted himself always with so much wisdom and precaution, that finding his natural heat decaying by degrees in old age he also diminished his appetite by degrees, so far as to stint himself to the yolk of an egg for a meal, and sometimes, a little before his death, it served him for two meals. By this means he preserved his health, and was also vigorous, to the age of a hundred years."

Sex is sprinkled liberally throughout *Longevity*. Perhaps that's not surprising, given the

publisher, but even though the editor and many of the writers are women, it could easily be accused of blatant sexism in both its photography and advertising. The May, June and July 1989 issues sported beautiful, extremely youthful models on the cover.

Advertisements for vitamins used more bodies, female only and, of course, all extremely young and attractive. The ad for the PTS Turbo 1000, a "computerized exercise bike [which] firms your thighs, hips and buttocks like no other bike", says it provides "amazing end results". The ad covers a full page and displays a young woman's shapely posterior, one that could easily have graced the pages of one of Guccione's other publications.

The ads' content and style say a lot about the attitudes and values expected from the magazine's readers. There are many blandishments for skin and hair care preparations and for various types of vitamins. Lipton's crows about its herbal teas and Tums underlines the calcium content of its tablets. Prunes are touted because they have four of "five types of fiber your body uses".

Drug companies also chime in. Hoffmann-La Roche provides a full-page progress report on β -carotene and cancer. Even Alcor, the organization that fast-freezes warm bodies, offers a half page of information: "If you love life, cryonics is for you. People who sign up to be frozen are so much in love with life that they can't bear to see it end." There are two toll-free numbers for the curious.

Here's my favourite ad, but don't ask me why they used an exclamation mark instead of a question mark. "Would You Like to be 21 . . . Again!", the Life Extension Foundation gushes. It has latched on to a Dr. Donner Denckla, who "knows how to turn back the clock" and is hard at work on a rejuvenation therapy that will make us "as attractive in

our 80s as in our 20s" and let us "... play tennis as well at 70 as at 20, have the sexual potency of a juvenile, and be smarter and more creative than ever before".

Sounds good. And reminds me of a story attributed to George Burns. George was asked how it felt to be past 80. "What do you mean 80? I feel just the same today as when I was 18. Which just goes to show you how pathetic I was then."

Fortunately, it costs only \$50 (US) to join the Life Extension Foundation for 1 year, a pittance that will get you a large bottle of "life extension mix", a jar of Rejuvenex ("for more youthful skin"), a special report on "Dr. Denckla's 'death' hormone", and an account of the benefits of "Co-enzyme Q-10, an energy-producing nutrient that helps to prevent heart attacks and has extended the life span of laboratory animals by 56%".

This magazine, with its mix of fact and fable, is fascinating for many reasons. On the positive side, it shows that concern about aging has arrived with enough force to spawn at least one glossy magazine. Yet, many messages it transmits are so contradictory and full of fantasy they call its general usefulness into question.

But we should not be surprised by this irrational yearning for eternal youth. The quest for the *elixir vitae* has been going on for some time — for at least the 3700 years since the discovery of Assyrian King Gilgamesh's special longevity-producing magical plant. *Plus ça change, et cetera*.

Although I personally don't look forward to the ravages that very old age has in store for some of us, I have tried to maintain a philosophic attitude towards my own increasingly spare and greying pate. Don't get me wrong, I don't really want to get old.

On the other hand, it is certainly preferable to the alternative.■